

An Open Letter to County Commissioners

Consumer Transparency re: the Methods Used in Animal Training, Care and Management Will Protect Pets, Their Owners, Local Residents and the Public at Large

Introduction: The Importance of Transparency between Clients and Service Providers

Frieden (2013) states that: “Free and open information empowers people to make informed choices and reduces the likelihood that misinformation or hidden information will endanger health.” It is not unusual and, in many cases, is mandated, that providers and manufacturers of potentially dangerous services and products place warnings on said products, thus providing transparent details to the end user regarding any risk from use. Tobacco, alcohol, gardening equipment, power tools, and even some children’s toys all come with warnings intended to ensure transparency regarding the potential fallouts of use. Further, many individual products are labeled with mandated warnings regarding their correct use. Indeed, it could be argued that all manufacturers and service providers have a legal liability to disclose any potentially injurious side effects and advise consumers of any inherent risks of using a particular product or service; that, in fact, they would be negligent if they failed to do so.

It is absolutely baffling, then, that professional dog trainers and canine behavior consultants currently have no legal responsibility whatsoever to disclose any information to their clients or the general public regarding the methods they use. At present, the only obligation is an ethical one, which, sadly, many elect not to acknowledge. This can be and, indeed, is very misleading to unsuspecting pet owners who have no knowledge of the pet industry’s lack of standards and regulation, or the differences between training methods and equipment. In many cases, pet owners only find out about these differences – and the fallout associated with them – when they find themselves encountering behavior problems caused by the use of outdated aversive techniques and equipment.

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Open information equates to transparency, which is an enormously important concept in the business of pet training and behavior consulting. This is – or should be – an environment founded on the principles of behavioral science, where practitioners are working with living beings, both human and four-legged.

Informed Consent

There are several issues that are pertinent when considering transparency. For example, as far as pet training and behavior consulting is concerned, a lack of transparency results in a client not understanding the foreseeable risks and discomforts; omits to provide detailed information regarding the actual training procedures to be undertaken; lacks to explain or provide professional alternative options for the client; and includes zero obligation or undertaking to gain a receipt of informed consent.



Informed consent is a behavioral science concept. Informed consent refers to a professional’s acknowledgement that a client has the right and responsibility to ensure they can advance their own welfare, emotional and physical well-being. In the case of animal behavior consulting, a pet owner is required to fulfil this obligation by advocating for their pet. This means that owners – and thus their pets – have freedom of choice in terms of the type of behavioral and training services they venture into, and that they do this voluntarily once they have sufficient information at hand to make informed decisions. Naturally, our pets cannot read and write, so the expectation and onus is always that both the owner

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Transparency & Informed Consent

and the professional, will *do no harm*. Conversely, the goal must always be to *do good*, a significant part of which involves not using any method or equipment that may cause physical or psychological harm. As such, informed consent is ethical and in the best interests of both the pet and his owner(s).

Informed consent ensures that all relevant information pertaining to the services the professional will provide, and the tools and methods utilized, are understood and agreed to by all parties. A key component of the agreement must be a clear outline of any potential risk from the application and use of the tools, methods and philosophies employed by the professional. This will ensure clients have an appropriate understanding of the circumstances and the expected results that will materialize from the client-service provider relationship, and any pursuing transactions. According to Welfel (2009, p. 157), “clients have ethical and legal rights to this information.”

Indeed, given the full responsibility pet ownership carries both in the home and in public, pet training and behavior professionals must be obligated to fully disclose all aspects of the professional-client relationship in terms of confidentiality, each party’s role, methodologies, equipment, systems and individual service provider philosophy (Tudge, 2010).

It is essential that industry professionals and public service officials are cognizant of a pet’s vulnerability and his or her obvious inability to offer informed consent, as well as the ethical and legal responsibilities pet owners have to their families and local communities, and the umbrella responsibility local governments have in terms of providing for safe public environments. This disclosure process should include statements that address potential conflicts of interest concerned with the animal’s welfare and the local and state animal

control ordinances and laws. According to renowned psychology professor Dr. Susan Friedman (2010): “Opinions vary about whether a given behavior's risk to others is sufficient to warrant governmental action. But where there are clear ways to prevent substantial harms, government may have a responsibility to act.”

Professional Organizations

In the field of animal training and behavior consulting, there are currently numerous professional organizations that offer membership and credentials. Few, however, hold their members to a strict code of conduct which involves the application of their trade through scientific protocols and the objective to cause no harm.



No Shock Collars

Unfortunately, as the pet training industry is entirely unregulated at present, anyone can tout themselves as a trainer or behavior consultant regardless of education, skill, knowledge or experience – or lack thereof. As a result, those who call themselves dog trainers, or the ever popular term “dog whisperers,” may still be utilizing outdated punitive methods, such as disc throwing, loud correctional “no’s,” devices and methods that work through eliciting a “startle response,” and/or an alarm reaction to prevent, barking, jumping up, growling or any other problematic behavior, and, in some cases, more extreme tools such as electric shock collars, choke chains and prong collars.

All of these are, sadly, still at large. They are training tools that, by design, have one purpose: to reduce or stop behavior through pain and fear. This, as opposed to a modern, constructional approach where operant behaviors are built, and problematic emotional reactions are changed via positive reinforcement and counterconditioning protocols based on the science of behavior.

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Best Practices & Education

The Pet Professional Guild (PPG) is the one US-based, international member association for pet professionals who use force-free training methods only. PPG holds its members to a very high standard in terms of ethics, protocols and transparency. Members are committed to humane, scientific and effective training, care and management protocols. They never use – indeed, never have any need to use – correction-based training, equipment and/or aversive stimuli for the care, management or training of pets, and the foundation of their work is always to do no harm.

Best Practices and Education

For those of us involved in the pet industry's evolution, we are at a point where many municipalities throughout the United States are seeing more of an impetus for industry legislation. This is largely motivated and predicated by this history of abusive, dangerous, and injurious practices to which too many dogs are still subjected, and which are behaviorally and physically damaging – or even deadly in some cases. Respected veterinarian, board certified animal behaviorist, author, and PPG special counsel, Dr. Karen Overall (personal communication to Hillsborough County Commissioners, Florida, March 30, 2017) states that “...anyone with access to a printer can call themselves a 'trainer,' and this is, sadly, the case for most of the training using force and shock (electronic collars, e-stim, et cetera).”

PPG understands that public officials must listen to and take advice from many stakeholders and constituents, and either now, or in the future, may be

approached by campaigns supporting pet training methods that involve the use of pain, fear and force. Please do not agree with them. Even research groups that argue the academic point about “formal dominance” – a mathematical construct to understand social relationships – do not support the popular misconceptions that dogs are wolves, dogs must be dominated, and that forceful training is the way forward. In fact, in the widely available research papers this point is specifically addressed and refuted (K. Overall, personal communication to Hillsborough County Commissioners, Florida, March 30, 2017).

PPG would like to make the case for your commission to lend its support only to organizations who have created their own best practices, which include in-depth testing of specific knowledge through both written examination and practical application, and continuing education that must include coaching from researchers and specialists in the fields of ethology, animal behavior and veterinary science; organizations that not only understand the importance of humane practices, but also those who are governed by science and ethics. Like continuing education in medicine, formal continued education matters, as does the ability to obtain and maintain liability insurances and annually renew a certification. If these sound like professional standards, it is because they are.

According to Overall (personal communication to Hillsborough County Commissioners, Florida, March 30, 2017): “There is big money in electronic training – big enough that the umbrella company for all the companies selling these products, have tried to recruit me with a laundry list of incentives and have not succeeded for a couple of reasons:

1. Forceful training, including shock, does not work because it can only punish – not inform. There are a thousand ways to make mistakes and if no one shows you what will work, you will try them all...and be

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Dominance Theory is Insidious!

punished until you stop trying. What works is actually telling the dog what you wish for him to do and helping him learn it.

2. Such training is mentally and physically injurious to dogs, resulting in increased rates of aggression, biting, relinquishment and euthanasia.”

In 2007, Overall published an article in the *Journal of Veterinary Behavior* titled “Considerations for shock and ‘training’ collars: Concerns from and for the working dog community.” In this editorial (p. 104), Overall stated emphatically that “absolutely, without



exception, I oppose, will not recommend, and generally spend large amounts of time telling people why I oppose the use of shock collars...Without exception, such devices will make my anxious patients

worse and allow the anger level of my clients to reach levels that are not helpful and may be dangerous.” In February, 2017, Dr. Gal Ziv published an article in the same journal that reviewed 17 studies on aversive training methods on a dog’s welfare and behavior towards people and other dogs. The highlights of this academic paper include:

- Trainers should rely on positive reinforcement based methods when training dogs and aversive training methods should be avoided when training dogs.
- Even when experienced trainers operate electric shock collars, a dog’s welfare is still at risk.
- Punishment-based training methods were related to a large number of reported behavior problems (Ziv, 2017).

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Methodology in Training and Animal Behavior Consulting

Humane, modern animal training relies on science-based protocols. According to Friedman (2010), who has pioneered the application of applied behavior analysis to captive and companion animals: “Within the field of applied behavior analysis, there is a 40-year-old standard that promotes the most positive, least intrusive behavior reduction procedures.” And yet, there are still plenty of trainers and behavior consultants who elect not to move forward into this arena, relying instead to more negative, intrusive, aversive and, indeed, punitive methods while offering misleading information about how they train, and the potential fallout of such methods (of which they may even be unaware). They may not gain informed consent from clients regarding methods and equipment used, and they may still be members of professional institutes, associations and councils because many organizations do not hold their members accountable for the training methods they use. Consequently, it is easy to be fooled when searching for a training or behavior professional (Pet Professional Guild, 2016).

Dog trainers who are still steeped in using punitive training methods are often known to use outdated terms such as “dominance,” “pack leader,” and “alpha dog,” all of which have been shown by canine behavior scientists and specialists to be inappropriate and inaccurate in their application to pet dogs. In addition, many such trainers use training methods founded in aversive protocols deemed obsolete and damaging – both physically and psychologically (see *American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior position statements under Supporting Documents, below*).

At the Pet Professional Guild Educational Summit for pet training and behavior professionals held in Tampa, Florida in November 2016, Overall (2016) stated:

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Scientific “Do No Harm” Methods

"Dominance theory has shut off scientific research and has crept into medicine to the point where we think we can do things to animals whereby we are asking them to 'submit'....dominance theory is insidious and has crept into everything we do with dogs and it's wrong. It has gotten in the way of modern science and I've just about had it. Every single thing we do with dogs hurts them because we don't see them as individuals or cognitive partners."

The Fallout of Corrective Training Procedures

Dogs are cognitive, intelligent creatures that experience emotions such as fear, anxiety, and joy. They are subject to the same laws of applied behavior analysis as any other living organism. Forcing dogs to comply to avoid being shouted at, told “no” in a threatening manner, or having some other discomfort forced on them through voice control, body language, eye contact, coercion, or equipment designed to inflict fear and/or pain does not enhance the canine-human relationship, nor does it create an environment where healthy learning can take place. Rather, a pet repeatedly subjected to aversive stimulation may go into a state of “shut down,” or a global suppression of behavior. This is frequently mistaken for a “trained” pet, as the pet may remain subdued and offer few or no behaviors. In extreme cases, pets may refuse to perform any behavior at all, known as “learned helplessness.” In such cases, animals may try to isolate themselves to avoid incurring the aversive stimulation. This is evidently counterproductive to training new, more acceptable behaviors. (O’Heare, 2011).

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For punishment to be effective as a means to training a dog, or any other animal for that matter, there are three critical elements that must be met: consistency, timing and intensity. First, the punishment must occur every time the unwanted behavior occurs. Second, it must be administered within, at most, a second or two of the behavior. Third, it must be unpleasant enough to stop the behavior. In the real world, outside science laboratories, meeting these three criteria is virtually impossible for a dog training professional, and most certainly for a dog owner.

According to Friedman (2010): “Punishment doesn’t teach learners what to do instead of the problem behavior. Punishment doesn’t teach caregivers how to teach alternative behaviors. Punishment is really two aversive events – the onset of a punishing stimulus and the forfeiture of the reinforcer that has maintained the problem behavior in the past.” Especially troubling for pet professionals is that punishment requires an increase in the intensity of the aversive stimulus for it to have any hope of maintaining behavior reduction.

Scientific “Do No Harm” Methods

All animals are motivated by food. Food is necessary for survival. It is therefore a powerful primary reinforcer and a critical component when used correctly as part of a strategic training or management plan. For behavior consultants who engage in behavior change programs where it is necessary to change a pet’s emotional reaction to a problematic stimulus, food is essential. When modifying observable behaviors such as growling, lunging and biting that are often manifestations of a fearful and/or anxious emotional state, the goal must be to change the underlying emotional response, thus enabling the dog to learn a new, more appropriate behavior.

It is frequently misunderstood that fear is an emotion

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Fear is an Emotion!

and not a behavior. You cannot simply “train it out.” Indeed, fear is often the underlying emotional state to aggressive behavior, and requires the implementation of a different set of scientific protocols and a greater understanding of emotional learning and animal behavior. A review of the scientific literature recommends the use of food as a reinforcer in desensitization and counterconditioning protocols that are specifically aimed at addressing the underlying emotions of fear and/or anxiety. In reality, using food to countercondition emotional responses is the most widely accepted method for treating fear-based behaviors (Overall, 2013).

Transparency and Consumer Advocacy: How to Choose a Training or Behavior Professional

“Positive relationship,” “natural methods,” “relationship building,” “positive only,” and “no food necessary” are all taglines regularly used by dog training organizations in their marketing literature. These expressions appeal to pet owners who may not always understand the various training methods available to them, and the fallout and unintended consequences of making the wrong choice.

There is perhaps no better way to summarize the current state of the industry than the words of Jean Donaldson, founder and principal instructor at The Academy for Dog Trainers, author of best-seller, *The Culture Clash*, and PPG special counsel, who states: “Dog training is a divided profession. We are not like plumbers, orthodontists or termite exterminators who, if you put six in a room, will pretty much agree on how to do their jobs. Dog training camps are more like Republicans and Democrats, all agreeing that the job needs to be done but wildly differing on how to do

it.” (Donaldson, 2006).

A key question, then, for legislators, and indeed anyone looking for a dog trainer or behavior consultant, is whether they will refer to those who promote methods that include pain and fear as a means of motivation, or those who use more progressive methods that rely on scientifically-supported protocols based on positive reinforcement and seek to do no harm. Before deciding, PPG urges pet owners, veterinarians, legislators, and all other animal care professionals to conduct thorough research given that so many fear-based training and behavior change methods can be very subtle, or even invisible, in the slick, magical way they are marketed to unsuspecting pet owners.



Conclusion: Ensuring Humane Care through Data and Science

On the basis of all we have outlined above, it is time that pet owners, when they engage the services of a professional, are guaranteed full transparency regarding the methods and equipment used, thus ensuring they have the ability to give informed consent and maintain the best interests of their pet and advocate for his well-being and safety. As already stated, science has repeatedly shown that punitive training methods based on fear and pain have serious consequences on an animal’s physical and mental well-being.

Speaking specifically of electric shock, decades of peer-reviewed, scientific studies show, whether discussing dogs, humans, dolphins or elephants, that, as a form of training to teach or correct a behavior, it is ineffective

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The Time is Now!

at best, and physically and psychologically damaging at worst. Pets need to be well-socialized and mentally and physically healthy if we are to ensure a productive and safe relationship for all members of their family and the public at large. As such, PPG urges all parties involved in determining new legislation to focus first on education, operational standards and modern, humane methods. Government has a responsibility to implement effective public health measures that increase the information available to the public and decision makers, protect people from harm, promote health, and create environments that support healthy behaviors (Friedman, 2010).

States Overall (personal communication to Hillsborough County Commissioners, Florida, March 30, 2017): "If you wish to make a difference and set a standard, make your decisions on the side of data, science and humane care and pass an ordinance that doesn't just protect dogs but endorses scientifically-proven, positive training methods."

Informed decisions such as these will not only be to the enormous benefit of pets and their owners, but also to the professionals who are engaged in the training, behavior, management and care of pets, local communities, and the public at large. The time to achieve this, and to shape the future, is now.

Thank you for your attention.

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Supporting Documents

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior Position Statement on Punishment. Available at: http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/vmth/local_resources/pdfs/behavior_pdfs/AVSAB_Punishment_Statements.pdf

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior Position Statement on the Use of Dominance Theory and Behavior Modification in Animals. Available at: https://www.boulderhumane.org/sites/default/files/dominance%20statement_0.pdf

Pet Professional Guild Position Statement on the Use of Shock in Animal Training. Available at: <http://petprofessionalguild.com/shockcollars>

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